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MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 001392

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TAGS: PREL KPAL IS IZ LE MO WI SU RS
SUBJECT: MIDDLE EAST: MFA ON NUG, IRAQ, LEBANON, WESTERN
SAHARA AND SUDAN

REF: MOSCOW 828

CLASSIFIED BY: POLITICAL M/C ALICE G. WELLS. REASONS: 1.4(B/D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: THE MFA STRESSED IN A RECENT MEETING THAT THE FORMATION OF A PALESTINIAN NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT REPRESENTED A MILESTONE IN HAMAS' SLOW EVOLUTION AND SUGGESTED THE QUARTET SHOULD REVISIT ITS POLICIES ON CONTACTS AND ASSISTANCE TO THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY. MFA DIRECTOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA SERGEY VERSHININ TOLD US THAT THE NUG HAD ALREADY REDUCED INTRA-PALESTINIAN VIOLENCE AND CRITICIZED ISRAEL FOR HASTILY REJECTING CONTACTS WITH THE NEW GOVERNMENT. HE SAID RUSSIA STRONGLY SUPPORTED THE SECRETARY'S EFFORTS TO RESTART TALKS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE

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PALESTINIANS AND SUGGESTED THAT SAUDI ARABIA COULD PLAY A USEFUL ROLE IN MODERATING HAMAS. RUSSIA CONTINUED TO ADVOCATE FOR A NATIONAL RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE IN IRAQ BUT WELCOMED RENEWED ENGAGEMENT WITH THE NEIGHBORS AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL PARTIES. HE CLAIMED THERE WAS NO URGENT NEED TO ESTABLISH A HARIRI TRIBUNAL AND ARGUED THAT ONLY LEBANESE CONSENT COULD PROVIDE THE TRIBUNAL WITH THE NECESSARY LEGITIMACY. VERSHININ WAS SKEPTICAL ABOUT THE CHANCES FOR PROGRESS IN WESTERN SAHARA AND STRESSED RUSSIA'S OPPOSITION TO SANCTIONS ON SUDAN AFTER BASHIR'S REJECTION OF PLANS FOR THE DARFUR PEACEKEEPING OPERATION. END SUMMARY.

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GOR AND NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

¶2. (C) MFA MIDDLE EAST DIRECTOR VERSHININ EMPHASIZED THAT RUSSIA SAW THE FORMATION OF A PALESTINIAN NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT (NUG) AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO ENGAGE WITH THE PALESTINIANS AND FIND A WAY FORWARD TO ACHIEVING A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT. HE EXPLAINED THAT MOSCOW WAS SURPRISED BY THE SPEED WITH WHICH THE PALESTINIANS HAD BEEN ABLE TO TRANSLATE THE MECCA AGREEMENT INTO A WORKABLE GOVERNING COALITION. RUSSIA HAD QUICKLY HAILED THIS DEVELOPMENT BECAUSE THE NUG PROVIDED THE QUARTET AND OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES "WITH A CHANCE, IF WE'RE ABLE TO USE IT" TO MOVE BEYOND THE EXISTING STALEMATE. HE SAID THAT ISRAEL'S REJECTION OF THE NUG WAS A MISTAKE AND THAT THE ISRAELI LEADERSHIP NEEDED TO ADAPT TO A FAST CHANGING SITUATION.

¶3. (C) TURNING TO QUARTET PRINCIPLES, VERSHININ
ACKNOWLEDGED THAT RUSSIA HAD A DIFFERENT INTERPRETATION OF STATEMENTS MADE BY PALESTINIAN LEADERS WHEN THE NUG WAS FORMED AND WAS PREPARED TO POCKET THE AMBIGUITY PROVIDED BY HAMAS "RESPECT" FOR PREVIOUS PEACE AGREEMENTS WITH ISRAEL. HE STRESSED THAT THE MECCA AGREEMENT HAD ALREADY PRODUCED A REDUCTION IN INTRA-PALESTINIAN VIOLENCE. HE SAID THAT THE EUROPEANS WERE REVIEWING THEIR POLICIES ON INTERACTING WITH THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY GOVERNMENT IN LIGHT OF THE NUG AND MECCA AGREEMENT, AND WELCOMED U.S. WILLINGNESS TO DIFFER WITH

ISRAEL ON CONTACTS WITH FATAH MEMBERS OF THE NUG.

¶4. (C) ON THE ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT IN RIYADH, VERSHININ SAID THAT DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER SALTANOV WOULD ATTEND AND WOULD LIKELY MEET WITH PALESTINIAN OFFICIALS. (NOTE: PRESS REPORTS INDICATE THAT HE DID SO ON MARCH 28.) HE WAS SKEPTICAL THAT THE SUMMIT WOULD PRODUCE ANY "BIG BREAKTHROUGHS" BUT HOPED THAT THE ARABS WOULD BE ABLE TO RECAPTURE THE "FRESH SPIRIT" REFLECTED IN THE 2002 SAUDI INITIATIVE. VERSHININ NOTED RUSSIA'S STRONG SUPPORT FOR SECRETARY RICE'S EFFORTS TO START A DIALOGUE BETWEEN PM

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OLMERT AND PRESIDENT ABBAS (WHICH A MARCH 28 MFA STATEMENT "POSITIVELY" ASSESSED.) VERSHININ FLAGGED RUSSIAN EFFORTS TO ENCOURAGE THE RELEASE OF KIDNAPPED ISRAELI SOLDIER GILAD SHALIT, WHICH VERSHININ AGREED WAS CRITICAL TO PROVIDING STIMULUS TO AN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN TRACK. HE CHARACTERIZED COOPERATION AT THE WORKING LEVEL BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE PA ON HUMANITARIAN ISSUES AS "TERRIBLE" AND ARGUED THAT ISRAELI ACTIONS CONTINUED TO UNDERCUT ABBAS' POSITION BECAUSE THEY RESTRICTED HIS ABILITY TO DEMONSTRATE IMPROVEMENTS IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE.

SAUDI ARABIA'S ROLE

¶5. (C) REVIEWING RUSSIA'S IMPROVED TIES WITH SAUDI ARABIA AS REFLECTED IN PRESIDENT PUTIN'S RECENT VISIT TO RIYADH (REFTEL), VERSHININ SAID THAT THE SAG PLAYED AN INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT ROLE ON ALL REGIONAL ISSUES. THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT MOVED VERY SLOWLY, BUT IT HAD DEMONSTRATED A DEFT TOUCH IN BROKERING THE MECCA AGREEMENT BETWEEN PALESTINIAN FACTIONS. HE THOUGHT THE SAUDI MONARCHY COULD HELP IN INFLUENCING HAMAS TO EVOLVE IN A MORE PEACEFUL (AND ACCOMMODATING) DIRECTION. VERSHININ CONCEDED THAT THE PACE OF CHANGE IN HAMAS' POSITION WAS TOO SLOW, BUT STRESSED THAT HAMAS WAS EVOLVING AND THAT ITS LEADERS WERE LEARNING TO BALANCE THEIR IDEOLOGICAL INCLINATIONS WITH THEIR NEED TO GOVERN.

IRAQ: ENGAGEMENT IN NEIGHBORS PLUS

¶6. (C) VERSHININ WELCOMED THE MARCH 10 NEIGHBORS PLUS MEETING THAT TOOK PLACE IN BAGHDAD AND SAID THAT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO DEVELOP THE IDEAS THAT CAME OUT OF THE MEETING TO CHART A NEW PATH FOR IRAQ. RUSSIA CONTINUED TO SEE A NEED FOR A CONFERENCE THAT FOSTERED NATIONAL RECONCILIATION. VERSHININ ACKNOWLEDGED THAT RUSSIA'S BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAQ HAD NOT MET EXPECTATIONS, WHICH HE ATTRIBUTED TO CONTINUING INSTABILITY IN IRAQ AND A LOW LEVEL OF POLITICAL CONTACTS BETWEEN MOSCOW AND BAGHDAD. RUSSIA CONTINUED TO HAVE A SUBSTANTIAL INTEREST IN OIL AND GAS DEVELOPMENT IN IRAQ, BUT DISCUSSIONS HAD NOT PROGRESSED FAR. (A SUBSEQUENT MFA STATEMENT NOTED THAT DFM SALTANOV'S MEETING IN RIYADH WITH IRAQI PRESIDENT TALIBANI FOCUSED ON TRADE AND ENERGY DIPLOMACY.)

LEBANON: NO NEED FOR HARIRI TRIBUNAL (YET)

¶7. (C) VERSHININ WAS COMPLIMENTARY ABOUT UNIIC CHIEF SERGE BRAMMERTZ'S MOST RECENT REPORT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL, CALLING IT BALANCED AND "UNPOLITICIZED" AND NOTING THAT BRAMMERTZ WAS FOCUSED ON COMPLETING THE INVESTIGATION. HE WOULD NOT SPECULATE ON HOW LONG THAT MIGHT TAKE, BUT STRESSED THAT ESTABLISHING A TRIBUNAL WAS NOT AN URGENT TASK. VERSHININ ARGUED AGAINST A CHAPTER VII AUTHORIZATION FOR THE TRIBUNAL, STATING THAT ITS LEGITIMACY DEPENDED ON ACCEPTANCE BY THE LEBANESE, WHO WERE NOT READY TO COME TO AGREEMENT. HE TOOK THE POINT THAT BRAMMERTZ HAD COLLECTED SIGNIFICANT EVIDENCE ALREADY, BUT NOTED THAT THE UNIIC CHIEF HAD NOT CALLED FOR THE IMMEDIATE ESTABLISHMENT OF A TRIBUNAL. HE EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE ONGOING POLITICAL TURMOIL IN LEBANON, WHICH COULD EASILY SLIP INTO A CIVIL WAR AND WOULD BE EXACERBATED BY "FOREIGN PARTICIPATION."

18. (C) ACCORDING TO VERSHININ, DURING EARLY-MARCH CONSULTATIONS WITH MOROCCAN DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER FASSI-FIHRI, THE MOROCCANS PREVIEWED A PROPOSAL FOR AUTONOMY FOR WESTERN SAHARA, BUT HAD NOT SHARED DETAILS OF THE PLAN. VERSHININ WAS SKEPTICAL ABOUT THE CHANCES FOR PROGRESS IN THE DISPUTE. RUSSIA SUPPORTED NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE GOM AND THE POLISARIO, BUT BELIEVED THESE WERE UNLIKELY. IN HIS ANALYSIS, WESTERN SAHARA WAS AN EXISTENTIAL QUESTION FOR THE MOROCCANS, WHO COULD NOT COMPROMISE ON THE QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE, WHILE ALGERIA LACKED ANY INCENTIVE TO COME TO A RESOLUTION. THE ZERO-SUM MENTALITY OF THE PARTICIPANTS MEANT THAT LITTLE COULD BE EXPECTED IN THE NEAR FUTURE, AND THERE WAS NOTHING ON THE HORIZON WHICH WOULD CHANGE THE EXISTING DYNAMIC. THE BOTTOM LINE, VERSHININ SAID, WAS ALGERIA'S CALCULUS THAT MOROCCO WOULD "WIN" IF WESTERN SAHARA WAS SETTLED.

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SUDAN: KEEP WORKING ON BASHIR

19. (C) REFLECTING ON SUDANESE PRESIDENT BASHIR'S MARCH 6 REJECTION OF THE SECOND PHASE OF THE UN-AU PLAN FOR DARFUR PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS, VERSHININ SAID THAT THE UN WOULD NEED TO REDOUBLE ITS EFFORTS TO PERSUADE THE GOS TO ACCEPT THE TROOPS. VERSHININ SAID THAT BASHIR HAD NOT UNCONDITIONALLY AGREED TO THE ENTIRE PEACEKEEPING PACKAGE. IN THE MFA'S VIEW, BASHIR FEARED THAT PERMITTING UN TROOPS ON THE GROUND IN DARFUR WOULD POSE A THREAT TO HIS REGIME. THIS, COUPLED WITH FEARS OF CONTINUING INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT INDICTMENTS OF SUDANESE OFFICIALS, WOULD MAKE GAINING AGREEMENT FROM BASHIR THAT MUCH HARDER. VERSHININ REJECTED THE THREAT OF SANCTIONS AND WAS PARTICULARLY CRITICAL OF BRITISH SUGGESTIONS OF ESTABLISHING A "NO-FLY" ZONE IN SUDAN, ARGUING THAT THIS WAS A NON-STARTER.

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COMMENT

110. (C) RUSSIA CONTINUES ITS HIGH-VISIBILITY DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST, WITH PUTIN'S FEBRUARY VISIT TO THE GULF AND JORDAN FOLLOWED BY A STEADY STREAM OF MID-RANKING ARAB OFFICIALS. WE SHOULD EXPECT MOSCOW TO CONTINUE TO PUSH ITS VIEWS ON HAMAS' EVOLUTION AND SEEK TO NARROW OR REINTERPRET QUARTET PRINCIPLES.

RUSSELL